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Visualising The Sociological Imagination: Photovoice and community-based learning

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The context

Family & Society offers community-based adult learners in Midlothian an introduction to Sociology, employing Photovoice as a tool for enhancing students' learning. Through Photovoice students can reflect on their learning, and themselves, by generating visual images of places, spaces, events, objects and people from their own communities, illustrating their own interpretations of sociological theories and concepts. Photovoice literally gives students a visual 'voice', encouraging creativity and independence in learning, enabling students to tell a confident sociological story of their personal and community concerns and futures.

This module examines the ways in which the concepts of diversity and inequality impact upon the lived experiences of individuals, groups and families in national and global contexts. Students express their own sociological imaginations, employing Photovoice as a means of expressing their personal identities, experiences and interpretations of sociological theories. The original conceptualisation of 'the sociological imagination' (Wright Mills, 1959) examines the inextricable links between personal experiences and societal structures.

Photovoice is a qualitative methodology designed to engender greater engagement and participation by 'researched' communities (Wang et.al, 1996; Ornelas, et. al, 2009). In this project, students are provided with a disposable camera and take photographs and interpret their visual images which reflect their own applications of sociological theory. The QAA Enhancement Theme *Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes*, invites us to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse range of learners, and this project is an example of how we have attempted to unleash the sociological imaginations of 'non-traditional' HE learners in their own communities.

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The Task At Hand

Employing a synthesis of the ideas of Choi and Fandt (2007), the aim of the project is to provide students with an opportunity to:

- (a) demonstrate a sociological understanding of real world issues
- (b) describe how sociological explanations can effect positive change in people's lives

For this assignment, students are asked to:

- (a) identify with one key sociological issue
- (b) explore the issue at an individual level and with the group
- (c) reflect on how sociological interpretations challenge our own assumptions about the social world
- (d) make suggestions about how sociological knowledge can help improve the communities in which we live, or with whom the student has identified

Step 1: Identifying an Issue

Select a social issue/problem. You should feel able to represent the issue visually, through your photographs. Identify one issue that you care the most about, or feel most connected to.

Write down what interests you about the issue. Do you care about the issue because it forms a significant part of your everyday life (e.g., your job)? Does it make you think about your own values or experiences that you may have gone through (e.g., marriage, unemployment) or a role you perform every day of your life (e.g., parent), an ascribed identity (e.g., male, female) and so on?

Step 2: Taking Photographs

Take at least 10 photographs to represent the issue you have identified.

Consider these questions:

- (a) what are the key aspects of the social issue that you find puzzling?
- (b) how can you effectively convey your ideas through a photograph?

You can create your own image, rather than taking a photograph of an object, people, place or scene. The key is to develop a visual image that will help you tell the best sociological story possible about your topic.

You *must* consider the ethical implications of what, who or how you are photographing (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

Step 3: Selecting and Presenting the Photograph

With the tutor and the group, select one photograph that can best give voice to your ideas, and which lends itself to telling a sociological story. Use the format opposite:

Picture

Caption:

Write a couple of sentences describing the issue you are interested in.

You:

Your *first* name and the location or identity you are coming from (e.g. Laura, wife or Paul, son and so on)

Step 4: Written Description: The Issue and Me

Write up to 1000 words, considering:

What's the story?

Provide a brief overview of the sociological issue and describe why you have connected with the issue. Explain how your photograph makes you think about the issue.

Self-Reflection

How does the issue and how you have represented it connect with what, how and who you are? For example, how did your values, experiences, and identities influence the choices and selections you made?

Sociological Theories and Concepts

Which sociological concepts, theories and theorists can help you tell a story about the issue identified, and why? How do they challenge people's common sense understandings about the issue?

The Future

What changes would you like to see in relation to the issue, as a consequence of your sociological story?



Here, the student presents a photograph of a painting by her daughter. The student had a particular interest in the ways in which transgendered people are marginalised in society, and used this photograph as a prompt to explore the ways in which sociological theory can help make sense of the social processes through which gendered and sexual identities are normalised and pathologised in society. This student was keen to explore literature which considered how and why families of transgender people struggle with their own reactions to their parent, daughter, son or sibling living as the other gender.



This photograph was taken during a forest walk. Through this image, the student attempts to capture the juxtaposition of light (optimism) and darkness (fear and anxiety) in the lived experience of mental illness. The student draws upon psychological, sociological and social policy literature linking mental health difficulties with instances of poverty and homelessness, as well as research focussing on the social class inequalities in quality of treatment for people experiencing mental health difficulties.



This garden fence was broken by the student's nephews during a recent visit. The student explained the circumstances which resulted in the broken fence to her neighbour. For the neighbour, it was hardly surprising that the scene of destruction had been the work of the student's nephews, particularly given that they come from an area of social deprivation in Edinburgh. Through this picture, the student was able to draw attention to sociological theory and research that illuminates the persistence of class-based inequalities and prejudices in contemporary Scottish society.